

## DEMOCRACY AND THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE<sup>1</sup>

**I**N a world torn and wracked by the horrors of war it may seem puerile to discuss a subject so academic as tolerance. But it requires no extended reflection and no recondite analysis to discover that many of the most grievous ills from which humanity is suffering derive from principles and practices that are intimately interwoven with just this issue.

If it be asked what ground there is for so extreme a statement, the answer is not difficult to find. Although the United States with intelligible self-complacency has seemed largely unaware of this circumstance, the fact is that Western civilization has for some years been undergoing a tremendous revolution—a revolution unlike most of those with which history is familiar, in which one dynasty succeeds another, or one government in a country displaces another. It is a revolution which affects the whole conception of the social order and the relation in that order of the individual to the state. It is a revolution which in its essence recognizes no national boundaries, although it has come to life in part as the result of the most chauvinistic and violent nationalism. It is a revolution in which all ethical categories have been made subject to the supremacy of stark, brute power. Truth, justice, honor, mercy, as these qualities have been known to earlier generations of men, no longer have meaning in this

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new order. To lie in order to promote a desired end is a virtue and to do it skilfully is a fine art, highly honored. Treachery and sedition are essential tools employed without moral qualms.

These conceptions could not have come to complete fruition and their present wide success had they not played upon and exploited the tolerance of innocent victims, had they not themselves been exercised with the most merciless intolerance—the most ruthless suppression of opposing views, a fact which we may well ponder soberly in view of the extreme tolerance we normally practice. It will be clear to even the casual observer that these great movements are saturated with psychological factors and influences affecting the interplay of conviction, belief, and tolerance in ways which it behooves a democracy like ours fully to understand and to understand quickly. In any case, I invite your attention for a few moments to the essentials of the question as it emerges in the life of a democracy.

Democracy is not so much a form of government as it is a way of life based on certain principles which are accepted as substantially axiomatic. Our American government, which is often called a democracy, is in fact a Republic which, of course, involves an elective and representative form of political control. But it is democratic in that all citizens enjoy certain inalienable rights. They are equal before the law and the state is the servant, not the master, of its people, while freedom of conscience, of worship, of speech, and of peaceful assembly are assured by the Constitution. Our democracy as a government of laws, not of men, stresses the paramount value of human personality. Consequently it is averse to all arbitrary and brutal coercion of the citizen.

Democracy as a political ideal and as a form of government has had a long and checkered career, which is itself an

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interesting subject but one I do not pause fully to explore. It has not commended itself to the genius of many peoples and only in recent centuries has it had any wide acceptance—and then for the most part under substantial limitations. In our own more immediate tradition, it comes from Colonial sources where, among the religiously acceptable, there was substantial equality of voice in the determination of civic affairs. But the ungodly had no part therein and as time went on the economically submerged classes also dropped out of the picture.

Now, what do we plain folk really understand by democracy? It surely involves the idea that every citizen should have his voice count in determining the government under which he is to live and that the views of an honestly determined majority should prevail. It involves also the notion that, majority or no majority, such a government will assure liberty of thought and speech and press, liberty of worship and of peaceful assembly, and will assure protection against the purely arbitrary acts of officials or of other citizens. It requires that no man shall be punished or deprived of his life or property without having his day in court and that the judges shall be independent of executive or legislative coercion and interference. It implies that as far as humanly possible, there shall be equality of opportunity for every citizen and especially for children. Though not involved in it as a form of government, democracy carries with it rather naturally the implication of certain social attitudes—self-reliance, self-respect, tolerance, respect for what men are rather than for what they have, simplicity of living, with a high estimate of thrift and foresight, but one which equally recognizes the values of generosity.

All in all, it is certainly fair to say that democracy because it is essentially *self-government*, requires and depends upon

moral forces more than any other form of government. Moreover, democracy is concerned to make the existence of differences possible, indeed, to encourage them. In this it differs utterly from all autocracies. Accordingly, among the most difficult and delicate of its problems is the treatment of minorities. Majorities are transient and their judgment is notoriously subject to other influences than those born of intelligence and wisdom. The minority of today may be the majority of tomorrow and for that reason, among many others, stable democracies are properly sensitive to the danger of imposing the will of the majority by any form of force, and especially where there is vigorous and numerous opposition. True democracy is assuredly government by the consent of the governed, of those who at the moment dissent from, as well as of those who support, the measures momentarily in question.

Because men have believed that human liberties are more completely safeguarded under democracy than under any other form of political control and because they have cherished such liberty above all other rights, and have believed that under its operation the highest human values are attainable, they have freely given their lives to defend it.

Now it is of the very essence of the democratic ideal that tolerance should be practiced to the highest possible degree, for many of the qualities which have been mentioned as most essential in a democratic state wither and die in the face of bigotry and violence. No one imagines that democracies are entirely made up of men devoid of prejudice and consequently immune to bias and intolerance. Quite the contrary is often the case. Nevertheless, no loyal and intelligent citizen in a true democracy is likely to condone the exercise of force in order that some unwelcome opinion or utterance should be repressed. In theory, at least, wide freedom to harbor and

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propound heretical opinion has been characteristic of our American way of life. As a people we have been very jealous of this prerogative, even when we thought it was being abused.

Epoch-making events in the last few years suggest the wisdom of examining afresh this whole tenet of free speech based upon free conscience and free thought.

Obviously, no totalitarian state can tolerate it any more than could the absolute dictatorships of earlier Kings and Emperors. The Caesar known as Caligula is said to have observed complacently: "I can do anything to anybody and whenever I wish." Evidently a challenge to this doctrine on the part of a Roman citizen would have been most destructive to his health. The modern dictator may be more cautious in voicing his power, but the only thought, the only utterance which will be tolerated from a common citizen is that which blindly supports the existing régime. From the castor oil treatments of the Fascists to the concentration camps and the purges of the Nazis and the Communists is but a step and all these policies are cut off the same piece so far as concerns the doctrines of the complete supremacy of the state, and especially its head, and the complete subserviency of the individual citizen. As long as he thinks what he is told to think, and does what he is told to do, and makes no protest, all goes well. But the moment he balks, the concentration camp and the graveyard are unpleasantly in evidence. Needless to say, this kind of a régime can only be kept in power by the most revolting system of spies and secret police working by terror and torture. As the authorities hold absolute control of press and radio the public has access only to the garbled information the government passes out. As a result, utterly erroneous impressions are easily spread abroad and upon fictitious evidence there is built and

fostered a public opinion warmly supporting the ruling powers and deeply hostile to all its enemies, whether foreign or domestic. Few things are so amazing in the ascent to power of the dictators as the extent to which presumptively intelligent people can be induced by propaganda to accept absolutely false statements, if only the possibility of hearing the truth is estopped.

It is clearly impossible in a genuine democracy to deny freedom of thought and speech without impeaching the moral ground upon which democracy rests. As such government rules by the consent of the governed it must provide adequate opportunity to hear all shades of opinion before legislation and action are determined. Nevertheless, in practice, exception has always been made to seditious utterance, to advising and provoking the violent overthrow of the government, or to giving comfort to its enemies in time of war. As peaceful or orderly methods are available to bring about a change in the government, this reservation against violence is entirely sound.

Of late, the leaders of the collectivist governments, like their predecessors in the last war, have been instant in the violent abuse of democracy and of the people of the United States in particular. The government-controlled press in these countries has been, if possible, more insulting and extreme. We have had in our own country repeated instances of groups representing one or other of the totalitarian states attempting to attack our form of government. This has sometimes been done more or less openly by the founding of 5th Column organizations in imitation of the brown and black and grey shirted groups abroad, dressing up in uniforms, parading and holding public meetings in which, as on a relatively recent occasion in Madison Square Garden, the speeches not only assailed democracy, but also lauded Nazi-

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ism and Fascism. A corresponding action in Germany would have seen all the performers instantly on the way to prison and probably to the execution field. Such performances may affect a few sentimentalists already sympathetic to the authoritarian conceptions, but for the most part they elicit amusement and a certain contempt for the childish mentality of the actors. Recent events abroad compel us to revise our estimate of the potential menace of this kind of thing. It appears doubtful whether Norway, or Belgium, or Holland, or France would have been so swiftly overrun, without the help of these moral vermin. We forget too easily the German sabotage practiced upon us in the last war.

Indeed, one of the revolting consequences of the development of totalitarianism is that to combat it successfully it is almost unavoidable to adopt its own technique. It craves unbounded power, can tolerate no threat to its sovereignty and consequently is a treacherous neighbor, ready and eager as opportunity offers to fabricate false issues under cover of which to wage war. And to war against a totalitarian state means to wage a totalitarian war in which all the usual freedoms peculiar to a democracy go into eclipse—temporarily, at least. The virus of this kind of movement poisons enemies and friends alike. It is a creeping pestilence which enters men's souls and minds and hearts compelling them in self-defense to acts which they detest.

Far more subtle and more dangerous than the open attack is the kind of boring from within which under orders and subsidies from Moscow the Communists have done in labor groups and among the disaffected unemployed, many of whom quite naturally feel that a social and political order which has brought them such unhappiness must be rotten, and that Communism with its promises of plenty for all and of superfluity for none must be the answer. These Com-

munist agents have been allowed publicly to attack democracy and our entire social-economic-political manner of life practically without restraint. To be sure there has been of late some effort, not very successful, to deport the foreign-born leaders of these groups who are not citizens; but they have been substantially free to say what they would as long as they were here.

The irony of the situation resides in the fact that were the kind of government that such folk desire, and seek to promote, to come into actual existence, the right they now claim and exercise to abuse the government under which they are living, would instantly cease and all who even whispered a doubt or a reproach would be liquidated—a pleasant, innocent-sounding word which means murdered.

Side by side with these two types of enemies to our democracy, the latter of whom are enjoying our national advantages, including freedom of speech and assembly while they attempt to overthrow it, are considerable numbers of so-called intellectuals who look with varying degrees of disfavor upon what they regard as the corrupt and money-managed "American order." Few of them are Fascist or Nazi in their outlook. As a class, this group is predominantly Communistic in trend and many of them are religious agnostics or atheists. They look with horror, real or pretended, upon the economic royalist, although not a few of them have acquired the leisure to carry on their parlor propaganda by means of fortunes built up by ancestral royalists of the kind in question.

If one adds to that group another of uncertain size, to wit: certain of the rank and file of the press, a number of the conspicuous figures in literature and the arts, including music and the stage, one would probably have accounted for almost all the persons resident in the United States whose views on



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our democracy, as it exists in action, are seriously critical or unfriendly, and who entertain sympathy in varying measure for foreign ideologies and especially for Communism.

To be sure, we have long had a Socialist Party which has not been so much concerned to overturn our form of government as it has been to introduce into it procedures and laws which would make our life more closely resemble the socialist Utopia. No good democrat can object to efforts of that kind which are aimed at peaceful reforms on a rational basis, whether or not one happens to agree with the particular philosophy employed to justify the ends sought.

Many, many years ago there was a small but virulent anarchistic group at work in the country. Many of its members came to untimely ends and their successors seem to have dwindled to negligible proportions, or to have gone over into the other camps of which we have been speaking. In any event, anarchism is a term now heard but rarely on this side of the water, and the original Russian anarchists are, it is said, largely engaged in conducting their own Communistic government.

Now, the menace to our institutions contained in the activities of the several groups I mentioned varies widely. The swashbuckling uniformed Heil-Hitler boys are negligible, unless we should get into war, when they would serve as a malign 5th Column. They doubtless exercise some influence with their own recently-emigrated non-Jewish compatriots who have not found the new world entirely given over to free milk and honey. But despite their efforts at secrecy, rituals, and all the other hocus-pocus, their activities are fairly out in the open and quite devoid of appeal to the average native American.

The literary left-wingers, the artists, the self-anointed intellectuals are potentially more dangerous; but their

appeal is predominantly to the upper intellectual levels whose members are in general quite capable of weighing issues thoughtfully for themselves and who are not to be stampeded quickly, nor in any one direction, by merely propagandist influences.

By far the most dangerous, as has been already indicated, are the subsidized borers from within who have taken foreign money to destroy American institutions and the loyalty of American citizens. Playing, as they do, upon real need and stressing, as they truthfully can do, the failures and defects and occasional corruption of our social order, they find a fertile soil in which to sow the dragon's teeth of violent revolution. One of the most powerful of American labor groups appears to have been officered to a considerable degree by men of this persuasion—to say nothing of the rank and file.

Unless I much misapprehend the trend of opinion, there are thousands of our citizens who resent the slurs and innuendoes and open attacks that foreign dictators and alien-minded agitators at times indulge in at the expense of our government and our American social order, who recoil with loathing from the mere thought of such men enjoying despotic power in this country, who would like to see those who are within our borders silenced and, indeed, transported to other shores where life might be more to their liking, but who nevertheless feel that any cure by forcible suppression would be worse than the disease. Censorship is always hateful to our people, no matter to what end employed, nor for what admirable purpose. Moreover, it is dangerous as well as distasteful.

Obviously, there are certain dangers which are indigenous to democracy, are indeed the defects of its virtues, and we must learn to recognize and guard against them. The danger which we have been discussing is among these. If freedom of

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thought and speech be in reality observed, there is always the chance that verbal assaults upon democracy will destroy public confidence and alienate sympathy and affection. If democracy is not truly the best form of government and cannot be convincingly defended by its supporters, then under a régime of unfettered speech it will fail. In other words, it has to rely entirely upon its intrinsic merits, not upon force, for its survival. In times of peace this is a risk to be faced calmly. In times of war, or public stress, it may be a very crippling circumstance.

If we cannot do anything drastic through government channels without aggravating the difficulty and sapping the very foundations of democracy itself, it seems clear that we can and must generate a far keener and more vital sense of individual responsibility for the creation of a sound public opinion—responsibility not only for the fearless clarification of our own convictions and judgment, but responsibility through whatever appropriate organization to make such convictions felt. It is, of course, easier to do nothing, easier to “let George do it”; but this is not good either for us or for George.

If we have no real beliefs; if we are spineless drifters with the current; if we have no courage with which to oppose the sinister termites who are insidiously wrecking the temple of our national faith; if we are so sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought that our minds and muscles alike are paralyzed; if our worship of tolerance has emasculated us of all brave and honest conviction and faith, then we shall deserve the humiliating fate which surely awaits us. I do not think we have fallen to so low an estate, but I am sure we need to be aroused to our real peril.

In my own mind, at least, certain conclusions emerge from all this with great definiteness.

It seems to me that no one can doubt that civilization is faced with a crisis more devastating and terrible than any which has occurred in the Christian era. Nor do I see how any intelligent person can believe that the United States can wholly escape its effects—effects which will be even more destructive spiritually than materially, and which may well ultimately destroy our way of life in the very effort we make to protect ourselves. To preserve democracy it is conceivable that we may be tempted or compelled to entrust our fate temporarily to an autocracy, which even though voluntarily adopted would be none the less an autocracy. It is absolutely essential that every citizen strive to understand the situation and above all is it imperative that as individuals we clarify and vigorously make known our convictions, that we do not under the comfortable guise of tolerance permit the enemies of our country to besmirch those things which are finest in it, and especially that we do not allow them unopposed to poison the minds of the young and the ignorant with corrosive falsehoods about our beloved land, nor instill in their hearts a cynical and defeatist belief that our democracy is spent, when, in fact, it is but just coming into its strong maturity, its full birthright.

Tolerance is indeed essential to the existence of a democracy, but conviction and courage are equally indispensable—utter conviction of the superlative value of freedom and truth, of justice and mercy and good will as the very soul of our nation, and unflinching courage to defend them, if need be, with our lives.

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